



# Peer Tutoring in Reading Comprehension

## The Importance of a Program in Your Elementary School

Every year, there are countless amounts of students who struggle to read at their grade level. And every year, those students advance on to the next grade with little to no improvements in their reading comprehension. Soon, their low reading achievement causes them to struggle in all of their subjects, and they begin to lose hope. Their teachers have done all they can do to give them the attention they need, but there are so many other students in the class as well. How can we help these students to improve their reading comprehension?

**In this newsletter, you will learn:**

- Why students are falling behind in reading.
- What the benefits of peer tutoring include.
- About paired reading and the buddy programs for peer tutoring in reading comprehension.
- About class wide and school wide programs for peer tutoring.
- How you can get started with peer tutoring in your school.



### Why are Students Falling Behind in Reading?

Before we can dive into setting up a program to fix the problem, we need to understand how this problem came to be. There are many reasons as to why students are falling behind in reading. According to Maheady and Gard (2010), "A national crisis of poor learning outcomes is evident in reading, math, and other core subject areas. These failures are particularly noticeable among students with special needs; pupils from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and those from environments of poverty, abuse, or neglect" (p. 71). In fact, many of the causes are already in place before the students even reach kindergarten.

**Family income:** According to *Bridging the Literacy Achievement Gap Grades 4-12*, family income and reading

achievement are closely linked (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). Poor children are more likely to become poorer readers than children from high-income families. Families with low-income may not be able to afford books and educational games for their children to practice with at home. Therefore, these children will be at a disadvantage early on.

#### **Home background and race:**

The US Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study in 2000 found that by the time children are only five years old, there is already a gap in school-related skills and knowledge between black and white children (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). Studies show that white parents buy more books,

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#### By: Name

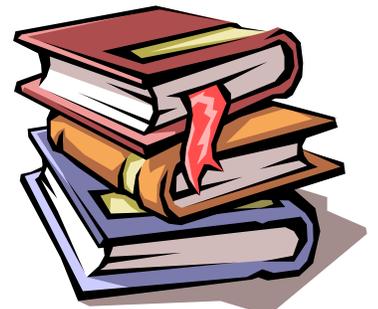
Peer Tutoring in Reading

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#### Inside this issue:

Why are Students Falling Behind?	1
The Benefits of Peer Tutoring	2
Paired Reading and Buddies	3
How is Peer Tutoring Being used in Schools?	4
How Can You Get Started?	7



tapes, and CDs, and engage more with their children in reading and other academic activities. Black parents engage more in singing songs and playing (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). While these activities are great for a child's development, they do not help with reading or academic achievement.

#### **Dialect and language:**

Linguistic background can affect a student if English is their second language, or if it is the second language of their parents (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). Parents who struggle speaking English cannot help

their children practice reading at home. However, when we have an ESL (English as a second language) student in our classroom, Strickland and Alvermann (2004) tell us: "As educators, we must resist the tendency to equate the use of language other than standard English with incompetence or a lack of intelligence" (p. 9). We still need to treat these students with kindness and respect, and work to find new ways to help them to succeed academically.

#### **Quality of instruction:**

Many teachers that are placed in low-income schools are not actually

qualified to teach. Proper materials also may not be provided to these schools to supplement education (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). Poor quality of education in low socio-economic status areas will contribute to the achievement gap.

**Assumptions:** Lastly, assumptions will deepen the gap. If we assume that students of certain races or socio-economic status cannot succeed, then we will not put forth the effort that is required that will make them be successful, and the students will see that. Educators need to pull students away from this belief.

## The Benefits of Peer Tutoring in Reading Comprehension

**Academic Improvement:** The benefits to having a peer tutoring program in your classroom or in your school are extensive. First and foremost, peer tutoring improves reading accuracy and comprehension. In a program that uses reading partners, one older and one younger student, the results showed that students improved between three and four times the expected rates in accuracy and comprehension (Miller et al., 2010). In programs set up like these, the younger students learn to use a wide range of new reading skills, and they become more skilled at selecting good books at their own reading level (Samway et al., 1995). The tutors, on the other hand, not only gain competence in the subject matter and in their reading, but in their social skills as well.

**Personal Benefits:** Amongst all students that took part in a paired reading program, improvements were reported in motivation, enjoyment, confidence, relating to others, and self-esteem (Miller et al. 2010). In addition to helping out students socially, peer tutoring helps students to feel a sense of belonging and fosters community within a school or classroom (Foster-Harrison, 1997). While peer tutoring united the community, it also gives students a newfound respect for their educators. Many of

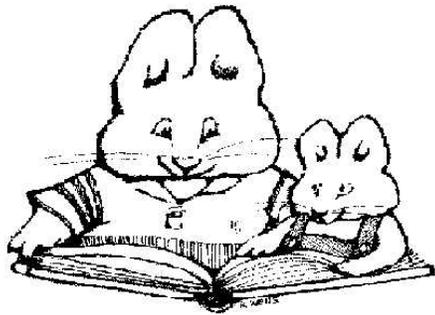


"...Improvements were reported in motivation, enjoyment, confidence, relating to others, and self-esteem."

the older students that took place in a paired reading program reported that they had gained a new appreciation for their teachers, for they now knew what it felt like to become teachers themselves (Samway et al., 1995).

**Who benefits:** All students can benefit from peer tutoring. However, research does show that there are some types of students that benefit more than others. Students of low-socioeconomic status gained significantly more from peer tutoring than students of high-socioeconomic status. Also, students who started off with a lower reading ability gained significantly more, with girls gaining more than boys (Topping et al., 2011). Lastly, students with learning disabilities were proven to benefit a lot from peer tutoring programs. Research found that in an everyday classroom, students with learning disabilities spent very little time actively participating in class (Maheady & Gard, 2010). Peer tutoring gave them the chances they needed to become active participants in their education, and they were able to open up to their peers in ways that they couldn't with their teachers.

# Paired Reading and Buddies Programs as Peer Tutoring



One great way to incorporate peer tutoring in reading comprehension is to bring Paired Reading or a Buddies program into your classroom. These programs focus on peer tutoring in reading between a pair of students, usually one older and one younger. This section will examine two programs that involve a buddy system for peer tutoring. Paired Reading is a structured program for tutoring in reading, while Buddies is much more flexible and laid back. Even though these programs are similar in nature, they are very different in how they operate.

## Paired Reading

**Paired Reading (PR) is a structured method for peer tutoring in reading.** Two teachers come together to decide that their classes will participate. They then work to match up the students. The most advanced tutor in one class will match with the most advanced tutee in the other, and so on (Topping et al., 2011). Once the sessions begin, the pairs are allowed to choose their own books that they are interested in, but the book must be above the independent ready level of the tutee and below the level of the tutor (Topping et al., 2011). Once the books are chosen, the tutoring can begin.

**PR has a particular procedure that the students must follow.** Pairs are to start out by Reading Together. They are to establish as signal for the tutee to let the tutor know when s/he is ready to read alone. The tutor will then stop reading and allow the tutee to continue. The pair will switch from Reading Together to Reading Alone several times during the session (Topping et al., 2011). When the tutee reads a word incorrectly, the tutor must wait four seconds to see if the tutee will correct the mistake. If s/he does not, then the tutor must demonstrate how the word should be said and then have the tutee repeat the word correctly before carrying on



(Topping et al., 2011). Pairs are encouraged throughout the session to discuss the book to develop enthusiasm and ensure that the tutee really does understand the content. Lastly, praise is important. The PR technique emphasizes using praise to encourage the tutee and create a friendship (Topping et al., 2011).

**“...The PR technique is democratic, it allows for the tutor and tutee to each control half of the process, keeping them both engaged and raising their confidence.”**

**Using the PR program is very beneficial to students.** PR increases the amount of individual attention given to learning readers and it increases the amount of reading practice done by these students (Topping et al., 2011).

Children also feel little failure with this technique because they are being helped within four seconds and they are receiving a lot of praise while reading (Topping et al., 2011). Furthermore, the PR technique is democratic, it allows for the tutor and tutee to each control half of the process, keeping them both engaged and raising their confidence (Topping et al., 2011).

**The results of this study mentioned several important factors of which to take note.** Reading Together Exactly, Tutor Praising, and Tutee Signaling were all rarely seen during the study, and these are all major aspects of the technique (Topping et al., 2011). However, the study still proved the PR technique was highly beneficial even if it wasn't followed exactly. The study also noted that cross-age tutoring—pairing students in different grades—was more beneficial than same-age tutoring (Topping et al., 2011). It was reported that gains in self-esteem were seen in both same-age and cross-age pairings in both tutors and tutees. However, cross-age tutoring showed further gains in wider self-worth, demonstrating that working with younger students provided extra benefits for the tutors (Topping et al., 2011).

## Buddies: A Reading Program for Cross-Age Tutoring

Buddies is a less structured reading program that uses cross-age tutoring to help students excel in reading comprehension. According to the Developmental Studies Center (1996), Buddies focuses on pairing up students in different grades because it teaches children how to interact with students in grades other than their own. As a more flexible program, Buddies allows you to set up the new program

“...Buddies programs foster community and bring teachers and students together...”

however you want. You can also choose the activities that you give to the students. The Developmental Studies Center (1996) recommends that you give the buddies a variety of activities to do. This keeps the

meetings fun and engaging for all students. You can teach the older kids how to do the activity first, and then they can teach their younger buddies.

Buddies programs have been found to have many benefits beyond those that are just academic. In addition to improving reading comprehension in both sets of students, Buddies is a valuable social experience for these kids. A hard to reach child might connect much better with a buddy, and they will finally be getting the attention they need to succeed (Developmental Studies Center, 1996). Furthermore, Buddies programs foster community and bring teachers and students together, especially if it is used school wide (Developmental Studies Center, 1996).

Benefits differ for younger and older students. For



the younger students (tutees), they benefit from having one-on-one attention, feeling like they are part of a new family, having a role model, and improving their language and thinking skills. For the older students (tutors), they benefit from having new responsibilities, being caring helpers, feeling appreciated and important, practicing their own reading skills, and gaining insight into being a teacher (Developmental Studies Center, 1996). Most importantly, all students benefited from learning in a new and fun

## How is Peer Tutoring in Reading Comprehension Being Used in Schools?

When it comes to implementing a new program in your school, you need to decide the scope of that program. This section focuses on the two types of programs you can implement: classroom wide or school wide. Ask yourself:

- What do your students need?
- Do they need a program in just their own classroom?
- Does the whole school need a program to help everyone succeed?

This section takes a look at three programs being implemented in elementary schools across the country. One of which is just for one classroom, while two of them are school wide programs to target particular students who are in need. By looking at these three programs, you can get ideas on what you think would work for your students.



## Peer Tutoring in the Classroom: Kansas City, KS

**Classwide peer tutoring (CWPT) is used in the classroom.**

Students are taught by their peers, and they are all trained and supervised by the classroom teacher (Maheady & Gard, 2010). *Together We Can* is a classwide peer tutoring program developed at Juniper Gardens Children's Project in Kansas City. It has been 30 years in the making, and studies show that classrooms that implement this program are flourishing in reading and other subjects. This program was established with the following criteria: the program would not create extra work for the teacher; it will benefit all children in the class; it will use materials and resources that are already in the classroom; it will supplement and not hinder current instruction; and it will be conducted within existing instructional time periods (Maheady & Gard, 2010). The program also has four primary components: weekly competing teams; highly structured and reciprocal procedures for tutoring; daily earning of points, public postings, and rewards; and direct practice in instructional activities (Maheady & Gard, 2010). With all of these factors in mind, the program can be facilitated with ease and success.

**During peer tutoring times, students act as both tutors and tutees and take turns.** All of the pairs in the class work one-on-one to practice their reading. They earn points based on how well they are working together and how much progress they are making on the activity they are working on. All of the pairs are a part of one of two teams. The points they earn will go towards their team, and each week a

**"Studies of the CWPT program found that it significantly improved students' academic performance and reduced disruptive behavior."**

winning team will be announced. The following week, the teams will switch and so will the pairs. Switching every week will increase the chances that a student will be on a winning team, and it also minimizes the possibility that students will form cliques (Maheady & Gard, 2010).

**Throughout the year, students will move from team to team and will end up working with every peer in the class.** This will foster a sense of community and bring all of the students together (Maheady & Gard, 2010). CWPT also provides a game format and will engage all of the students in their learning. It provides immediate feedback and offers rewards for the students to increase their academic performance (Maheady & Gard, 2010). With CWPT, all of the students in the classroom will be actively involved in their education, and they will want to improve and do their best.

**The CWPT program has many benefits for students.** Studies of the program found that it significantly improved students' academic performance and reduced disruptive behavior. It also enhanced interpersonal relations between students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, the CWPT program greatly benefited children with disabilities, because they got ample opportunities to interact with their peers and feel like they were a part of a new family.

## School Wide Programs for Peer Tutoring Across the United States

There are many different ways that you can implement a peer tutoring program into your school. This section will take a look at two different school wide peer tutoring programs that have taken place to improve reading comprehension. One of them utilizes the QUICK method, a reading strategy that tutors and tutees focus on to improve the ways that they practice reading. The second program is the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies program. It focuses on using three simple strategies to tutor students in reading. Both of these programs have been successful in elementary schools across the United States. By taking a look at these two different programs and their results, it will give you ideas for your own school wide tutoring program.



## QUICK Program

The QUICK method is a comprehension strategy consisting of five elements: Questioning, Understanding new words, Imaging, Connecting, and Keeping it all together (LaGue & Wilson, 2010). The program in LaGue and Wilson's study included 66 percent low-income students and 27 percent English Language Learner students. The primary goal of this particular program is to help bridge the achievement gap (LaGue & Wilson, 2010). The key to making this happen is *discussion*.

The QUICK program relies on student volunteers. Volunteers will go through an application process and are selected based on interpersonal skills and academic achievement (LaGue & Wilson, 2010). The selected tutors must participate in a training week where they are taught how to use the QUICK method and how to use it to enhance comprehension skills (LaGue & Wilson, 2010). The QUICK method is broken down into the following components:



**Questioning:** Think about the author's purpose and underlying meaning. Asking questions while you are reading has been found to positively affect students' comprehension.



**Understanding New Words:** QUICK allows students to investigate sentences and determine the meanings of words they do not know.



**Imaging:** Students are asked to draw pictures of what they read to demonstrate their understanding.



**Connecting:** Tutors model making connections to engage the students' background knowledge.



**Keeping it All Together:** QUICK aims to help the students comprehend a text as a whole (LaGue & Wilson, 2010).

The QUICK program provides many tools for students to practice using QUICK on their own. Tutors provide QUICK bookmarks as a reminder of the techniques the students can use while reading. Also, there are QUICK task cards as a way to reinforce comprehension. The QUICK cards allow the students a chance to write about the text and break it down into the five QUICK components (LaGue & Wilson, 2010).

There are many benefits to using the QUICK method for peer tutoring in reading comprehension. Benefits include increased reading comprehension for both tutors and tutees. Also, students reported having improved attitudes towards reading and more self-confidence for both groups of students (LaGue & Wilson, 2010).



## Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies

**Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)** is a peer-tutoring program used in elementary school to improve students' abilities in reading. (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010). This program was developed for students with diverse academic needs. It began in the 1990s and was originally designed for kindergarten to fifth grade students. It has been used with students who have learning disabilities and has been expanded to include English Language Learners (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010).

**Students take turns being the tutor and the tutee.** Students who participate in the program are ranked from highest to lowest reading achievement. The first student on the "high" half of the list is paired with the first student on the "low" list (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010).

**During the session, the students practice using three specific reading strategies for comprehension.**

- First, students will read a text and then practice **retelling** what

they just read. The higher level student always goes first to demonstrate what to look for in the text. The lower level student then goes next with the same set of reading material (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010).

- Second, pairs work on **paragraph shrinking**. The pairs practice reading a single paragraph, and then they work to identify the main points. They have to look for the most important piece of information that was present in

this one paragraph (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010).

- The last strategy that the PALS program uses is **prediction relay**. This involves the students predicting what a text is going to be about based on the title. After they read the passage, they then get to evaluate their original prediction and discuss whether or not they were correct. They then switch roles and the other student gets to try prediction relay with new material (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010).

**Students are taught to correct their partners' errors, award points for being correct,**

**"The use of the three comprehension strategies- retelling, paragraph shrinking, and prediction relay- proved to be very successful with all students, especially English Language Learners."**

**and provide consistent praise and feedback** (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010). The PALS program is incorporated into classrooms to aid students in need. Schools that participate in the PALS program incorporate the program into the

whole school, allowing all students the opportunity to benefit from it.

**The What Works Clearinghouse study on the PALS program showed extensive improvements for participants.** Reading achievement improved by twelve percentile points overall in one year. The range of improvement for students was between five and twenty-five percentile points (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010). The use of the three comprehension strategies- retelling, paragraph shrinking, and prediction relay- proved to be very successful with all students, especially English Language Learners.



## How You Can Get Started: Tips on Developing a Peer Tutoring Program in

*Peer Tutoring for K-12 Success* by Elizabeth Foster-Harrison (1997) tells us that there are four keys to success for developing an effective tutoring program:

1. **Specified Goals**
2. **Structured program design**
3. **Adequate training**
4. **Well-matched tutors and tutees.**

If you keep these four key concepts in mind, you can work to create a peer tutoring program that is perfect for your school and your students.

**Specified Goals:** When it comes to establishing goals, be sure to set goals that are reasonable for your participants. However, you do not want to sell yourself short. You want to choose goals that reachable,

yet still provide you with a challenge.

### **Structured Program**

**Design:** There are many different factors that you should keep in mind when designing your program. For starters, studies show that tutoring procedures are most effective when they are clearly structured and trained (Topping et al., 2011). Be sure to structure your tutoring so that students understand the procedures and can follow them precisely. Secondly, more sessions per week (greater than three) are more effective than fewer sessions. However, shorter sessions (less than thirty minutes) were more effective than longer ones (Topping et al., 2011). Therefore, when designing your program, try to aim for several short sessions in a week. Furthermore,

Foster-Harrison (1997) suggests that we schedule peer tutoring to take place during the school day. This demonstrates to students and their parents that tutoring is worthwhile and is a priority. This will also ensure that all students can take advantage of this opportunity. However, if you schedule peer tutoring for during the school day, it must not be during any lunch or recess. Students still need their social time (Foster-Harrison, 1997).





**Adequate Training:** As it was mentioned earlier, students respond best to procedures that are structured and trained. Therefore, it is recommended that all tutors and tutees are adequately trained in the procedures that you would like them to follow. This will ensure that the sessions are structured, organized, and successful.

**Well-matched Tutors and Tutees:** There are several tips to keep in mind when you are matching tutors and tutees. Match the students based on skill AND personality (Pugh, 2005). Matching up students based on skill alone will not guarantee that they can work well together. Secondly, disregard personal preferences (Pugh, 2005). Students will want to be teamed up with their friends, but then the pair wouldn't get any work done. Ignore personal preferences and go with the pairings that you think would be the most successful.

**If you are implementing a school wide program for extra help, there are a few tips to keep in mind when designing your new program.** First, limit the number of students in the beginning (Pugh, 2005). You do not want to overwhelm the administrators of the program

right as it is starting out. Keep the number of participants to a minimum; the program can always grow later. When it comes to choosing who will participate, you will need to find students to act as your tutors. Do not just base your decisions off of academic skills. You need to choose tutors with the skills to teach and interact with others. Also, you want them to have a desire to tutor and be a part of the program (Pugh, 2005). This will ensure that they have the enthusiasm and skills needed to help out the tutees. When you are choosing your tutees, you want to choose students who are withdrawn or acting out in addition to having academic struggles (Pugh, 2005). These students will benefit in multiple ways from participating in your program. By choosing these types of students, you are giving them the opportunity to make friends and improve their classroom behavior.

## What is YOUR Role?

The last tip that you should keep in mind is this: YOU need to be an active participant in the program. If you are facilitating a peer tutoring program, you need to be involved and engaged with it as much as you can. Students need to see that their educators want them to succeed. Through establishing a peer tutoring program, you are showing your students that you believe in them and that you want to provide the tools they need to learn and grow. As an active participant, you will be able to see how your program is progressing and whether or not it is successful. You could then make the necessary changes it needs and remain active in your role as an educator. Topping et. Al. (2011) also recommend that teachers be particularly vigilant during peer-tutoring sessions. Keep your students on task and focused at all times. Educators hold the keys to success in their hands. It is up to us what we do with them.

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